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ABSTRACT

A study explored the relation between students' participation in class discussions and strategies used by instructors to overcome communication apprehension. The study to examined the impact of an interactional teaching style and specific structural exercises on students' perceptions of their classroom participation. Fifty-six undergraduate students enrolled in a social problems course participated in the study. At the end of the course students completed four-page questionnaires assessing their participation and perceived changes in their communication skills. Results indicated that while the students expressed changes in their communication skills and comprehension of a course topic as a result of their class participation, their perceived participation in class discussions was related significantly to communication apprehension. The teacher's interactional style and the structured course exercises had no significant impact on class participation. Findings suggest the importance of communication apprehension in the college classroom environment, but do not clearly reveal the roles of the teacher and the course structure. It may be that alternative strategies need to be designed to reduce communication apprehension, and that those strategies might be more effective within the family environment. (Three tables of data are included, and 19 references are attached.) (PRA)

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# STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE MEDIUM-SIZE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

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# STRATEGIES TO IMPROVE STUDENT COMMUNICATION SKILLS IN THE MEDIUM-SIZE COLLEGE CLASSROOM

Communication Apprehension (CA) in the college classroom has been an area of much concern and discussion since the 1970's (McCroskey, 1977). Overcoming communication apprehension has been a major issue facing educators interested in encouraging the development of student communication skills. Part of the difficulty in reducing CA relates not only to the size of the class and teaching styles, but to the student's family background and confidence in self (Gleason, 1988; Kuhn, 1988; Williams, 1988; Daly & Friedrich, 1981). The effects of these factors on classroom interaction have not gone unnoticed by many universities.

With increasing student enrollments many universities are increasing course sizes. These increases in class size can have negative effects on the way teachers interact with students as well as on how students feel about themselves in a larger class environment. Unfortunately, little research has examined the impact of the medium-size (30-60 students) course on student interaction and communication skills. Perhaps more importantly, few studies suggest strategies teachers could use to increase student participation and self-confidence in this sized class environment.

In this paper we focus on strategies to improve class discussion and interaction, student comprehension and self-confidence. In the spring of 1989 a unique teaching approach was

introduced in an introductory social problems course at a midwest university. Specific interactional styles and structural features were employed to encourage class discussion and promote student participation. At the end of the quarter students were given a four-page questionnaire to assess their participation and perceived changes in their communication skills. Using multiple regression techniques, we examine how the teaching style and course structure relate to student participation in this medium-size class. A rationale for the strategies used in this course and its relevance for other medium-size courses are discussed. We begin our discussion by first reviewing recent literature on factors that aid and abet student communication skills in the college classroom.

RESEARCH BACKGROUND

Communication apprehension is the anxiety or fear associated with either real or anticipated communication with another individual or group (McCroskey et. al, 1984). Since the 1970's, researchers (McCroskey & Anderson, 1976; McCroskey et. al, 1977) have shown a relationship between CA and academic performance of college students. Research has indicated that for effective learning to occur, students may benefit through active participation in the class (Hamlin & Janssen, 1987; Smith, 1977; Mayer, 1986). As educators try to actively involve students in class discussion, they find many undergraduates fearful and relucant to interact (Kuhn, 1988). Students who routinely handle communicaton interactions can respond with silence in unfamilar and threatening situations (Kougl, 1980).

Students high in CA tend to avoid taking part in classroom interaction (Bloom, 1976). When students have positive self-concepts, CA tends to decrease; moreover, CA may be lessened even further with positive feedback in the class environment (Watson, 1985).

Additionally, research has shown that the larger the course the more it inhibits classroom communicaton (Gleason, 1988). CA occurs more often in courses with thirty-five or more students (Bowers, 1986). When students in a larger course are asked for their comments, they often are reluctant to participate and many times will not even approach their instructors after class (Hosley, 1987). Recent research has shown that classroom climate allows students to feel more comfortable when communicating (Williams, 1985), thus suggesting the importance of teaching styles in the classroom.

Norton & Nussbaum (1980) have recently reviewed teaching methods that have facilitated active participation. Specifically, they found that a teacher's communication style, humor, and self-disclosure maintain student attention and increase student learning (see also Lynn, 1976).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

If students' participation in class discussion is affected by the teacher's interactional style (e.g., use of humor, self-disclosure and narratives), as well as the structural aspects of the course (e.g., use of advanced questions, speed-writing, small group discussions), then we would expect some impact from these processes on student communication skill and understanding of the

course material. Not only would the teaching strategies affect student communication behavior but so would the student's experiences in his/her family environment and level of CA. These issues provide the basis for the following research questions:

Q1: What are the effects of teacher interaction and course structure on student participation in the medium-size course?

Q2: What impact does a student's family background and CA have on participation in class discussion?

## METHOD

### Subjects

Fifty-six undergraduate students served as participants of this study. The students were enrolled in a social problems course. This course was designed to familarize students with key issues facing contemporary society.

### Procedures

To improve student interaction in this medium-size classroom three specific structural exercises were utilized. In the beginning of the course students were given a list of questions that would be discussed throughout the term. This preview gave students the opportunity to familarize themselves with course issues and focus their reading on areas that would be discussed at a later date.

The instructor also had students participating in speedwriting exercises (see Fulwiler, 1987 for a complete description of this technique). Speedwriting consists of students writing for five minutes on a particular question. Students are told to write as much as possible without concern

for grammar or sentence structure. This activity gives students who cannot always verbalize as quickly as their other classmates more time to develop their responses.

Finally, small discussion groups were utilized from the beginning of the class. This exercise brought a number of results. First, students were able to meet and get to know other members of the class. The small groups also gave students the chance to explore their ideas before presenting them to the entire class. Students could collect ideas from others, compare and contrast the ideas, reinforce compatible opinions, and present summary conclusions to the class as a group instead of by oneself.

To facilitate student participation the instructor used a communication style that encouraged interaction. The instructor encouraged questions by always having a set of prepared questions for each class meeting. This promoted a positive feeling toward the use of class time in discussion. To encourage students to participate in discussions, the instructor provided positive responses and feedback after each student response.

Measures

At the end of the quarter the students were asked to evaluate their level of class participation as well as reflect on past family experiences relating to encouragement and participation in family discussions. Additionally, the questionnaire contained a series of items designed to assess communication apprehension, teacher interactional style, structured discussion exercises and student communication skills.

A full range of demographic characteristics was also included in the questionnaire. The principle measures we examine here are as follows:

Family Encouragement - "When growing up, did you feel that you were encouraged/discouraged to participate in family discussions (e.g. dinner time, tv time)?" The response categories ranged from encouraged (1) thru discouraged (5).

Family Participation - "During family discussions, do you feel that you talk alot or a little?" The response categories ranged from talk alot (1) thru (5) talk a little.

Class Participation - "How often do you usually talk in class?" The response categories were never, once a month, twice a month, once a week, once or more every class meeting.

Communication Apprehension Index - Using a seven-item composite of a student's assessment of how he/she feels about talking in classroom discussions, we constructed an index of communication apprehension. The response categories were strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The items were:

I find talking in classroom discussions hard because,

(a) I'm afraid of being laughed at.

(b) I get nervous in front of a large group of sixty students.

(c) I'm a very shy person.

(d) I never know what to say.

(e) I do not have a great deal of self-confidence.

(f) My teacher intimidates me.

(g) I experience physical changes (e.g. hands tremble, knees shake, tongue swells).

Teacher Interactional Style - Using a three-item composite of a student's assessment of the kinds of teacher behavior that make participating in class discussions easy, we constructed an index of teacher interactional style. The response categories were strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree. The items were:

Participating in class discussions is usually easy for me when,

(a) The teacher gives positive feedback.

(b) The teacher encourages questions.

(c) The teacher promotes class discussion.

Structured Discussion Exercises - We constructed an index relating to the structured discussions in the class by taking the composite score of a student's assessment of the type's of exercises that make participating in class discussions easy. The response categories ranged from strongly agree thru strongly disagree. The items were:

Participating in class discussions is usually easy for me when,

(a) The discussion material has been announced in advance so I can prepare.

(b) The teacher breaks the class into small groups for discussion.

(c) The teacher gives me time to speedwrite my answer before discussing my ideas in class.

Results

In Table 1 we present the univariate information regarding the students' family experiences, class participation and perceived changes in communication skills and comprehension. Sixty-eight percent of the students reported a fairly high level of encouragement to participate in family discussions. Only nine percent felt that they were discouraged to participate in family discussions. Perceived participation in family discussions was reported to be quite high by fifty-seven percent of the students. On the other hand nineteen percent of the students felt that they only talk a little during family discussions.

The students' self-perception of their class participation showed that over half of the students (sixty-five percent) believed that they contributed to class discussions on a fairly regular basis (e.g. once a week or more). While twenty-three percent of the students believed that they contributed to class discussion occasionally, twelve percent of the students believed that they never participated orally in the class.

Table 1 About Here

The students were asked whether they experienced any changes in their communication skills and comprehension levels as a result of participating in class discussions. As Table 1 reveals, forty-four percent of the students believed that their discussion skills changed for the better due to their class participation. The largest perceived changes were related to a better understanding of the course topic in general, with sixty-eight percent of the students expressing a change. Eighty-one

percent of the students expressed an increase in their understanding of social problems. Self-confidence was reported as staying the same by sixty-seven percent of the students.

To examine how these factors were related to class participation, we examined their bivariate correlations (see Table 2) and their unstandardized and standardized regression coefficients (see Table 3). Using ordinary least square (OLS) regression methods, we assessed the degree to which class participation was influenced by students' family experiences, communication apprehension, teaching style and course structure, controlling for gender and age as demographic characteristics.

Tables 2 & 3 About Here

We found overall that CA was the only significant factor to affect class participation. Specifically, students with higher levels of CA reported less participation in class discussions than students with little to no communication apprehension. There were no differences in class participation for women or men, nor for older or younger students. In addition, family experiences, teaching style and course structure had no significant impact on class participation.

## CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this paper was to examine the relation between students' participation in class discussions and teaching strategies to overcome communication apprehension. The study was quasi-experimental in design in that we sought to examine the impact of a teaching interactional style with specific structural exercises on students' perceptions of their classroom

participation. While the students expressed changes in their communication skills and comprehension of the course topic as a result of their class participation, we found that their perceived participation in class discussions was related significantly to communication apprehension. Interestingly, the teacher's interactional style and the structured course exercises had no significant impact on class participation.

While these findings suggest the importance of communication apprehension in the college classroom environment, the roles of the teacher and course structure are not clearly revealed in this study. It may be the case that alternative strategies need to be designed to reduce communication apprehension and that those strategies might be more effective within the family environment.

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics for Relevant Variables (n=56)

| | | | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family Encouragement | encouraged | 1 | 43% |
| | | 2 | 25% |
| | | 3 | 21% |
| | | 4 | 9% |
| | discouraged | 5 | 2% |
| Family Participation | talk alot | 1 | 35% |
| | | 2 | 22% |
| | | 3 | 24% |
| | | 4 | 16% |
| | talk a little | 5 | 3% |
| Class Participation | Never | 0 | 12% |
| | Once a Month | 1 | 17% |
| | Twice a Month | 2 | 6% |
| | Once a Week | 3 | 40% |
| | Once or More Every Class | 4 | 25% |
| Self-Confidence | Stayed Same | | 67% |
| | Increased a Little | | 27% |
| | Increased a lot | | 6% |
| Discussion Skills | Stayed Same | | 56% |
| | Increased a Little | | 34% |
| | Increased a Lot | | 10% |
| Understanding of Topic | Stayed Same | | 30% |
| | Increased a Little | | 42% |
| | Increased a Lot | | 28% |
| Understanding of Social Problems | Stayed Same | | 19% |
| | Increased a Little | | 44% |
| | Increase a Lot | | 37% |

Table 2. Bivariate Correlations Among Relevant Variables (n=56)

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| (1) Class Participaton | 1.00 | | | | | | | |
| (2) Family Encouragement | -.21 | 1.00 | | | | | | |
| (3) Family Participation | -.26 | .61 | 1.00 | | | | | |
| (4) Sex (0=male) | -.03 | -.30 | -.16 | 1.00 | | | | |
| (5) Age | .22 | .04 | .05 | -.28 | 1.00 | | | |
| (6) Communication Apprehension | .48 | -.17 | -.39 | -.01 | .23 | 1.00 | | |
| (7) Teaching Style | -.19 | .41 | .34 | -.18 | -.01 | -.14 | 1.00 | |
| (8) Structure | .01 | -.13 | -.05 | .01 | -.01 | .11 | .14 | 1.00 |

TABLE 3. Regression of class participation on family background, demographic characteristics, CA, and teaching variables (n=56)

| Independent Variables | (1) b (B) | (2) b (B) | (3) b (B) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Family Encouragement | -.071<br>(-.059) | -.106<br>(-.088) | -.089<br>(-.074) |
| Family Participation | -.257<br>(-.242) | -.091<br>(-.086) | -.074<br>(-.069) |
| Sex (0=male) | .114<br>(.043) | -.004<br>(-.002) | -.039<br>(-.015) |
| Age | .094*<br>(.299) | .057<br>(.181) | .054<br>(.170) |
| Communication Apprehension | | .120*<br>(.347) | .124*<br>(.358) |
| Teaching Style | | | -.052<br>(-.074) |
| Structure | | | -.026<br>(-.039) |
| Constant | 1.093 | -.814 | -.437 |
| R-Square | .151 | .241 | .248 |

*$p < .05$

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